What is an Event?

by Robert Bedrosian

Download from Internet Archive here

> *Mere opinions, in fact, were as likely to govern people's actions as hard evidence, and were subject to sudden reversals as hard evidence could never be. So the Galapagos Islands could be hell in one moment and heaven in the next, and Julius Caesar could be a statesman in one moment and a butcher in the next, and Ecuadorian paper money could be traded for food, shelter, and clothing in one moment and line the bottom of a birdcage in the next, and the universe could be created by God Almighty in one moment and by a big explosion in the next—and on and on*. Kurt Vonnegut, Galapagos

[1] In disciplines such as particle physics, probability theory, and computer programming, among others, the term "event" has diverse though specific technical definitions. In the writing and study of history, however, "event" has the commonly understood definition of "a happening" or "a noteworthy occurrence." The event-driven paradigm has been dominant in historical writing from Herodotus to the present. The who, what, when, where and how of the event are identified—for better or worse—depending on the author's ability. But the generic nature of an event is seldom discussed by historians (1).

In this essay we shall ask the question "what is an event?" in historical analysis. We believe that it is not presently possible to offer a single useful definition of an historical event, for the same reasons that definitions of our perceived reality fall short. As humans, we can only comprehend so much, and the ultimate limitation is precisely our humanness. We certainly may attempt to peer beyond our physical and mental design, but ultimately the results of these attempts are speculation. With history, we are not in the physics lab where experiments lead to proofs which lead to theorems and "laws" which can be demonstrated repeatedly with the same results. Thus, when historians in the 19th and 20th century turned to the natural sciences for inspiration, it is most unfortunate that physics with its "laws" was their model. Rather, they should have looked to astronomy. There "patterns" may not emerge for hundreds or thousands of years, and it takes generations of record-keeping about celestial events to perceive such patterns. Sadly, we humans with our relatively short life spans have an abhorrence of endeavors that do not show "results" during our own lifetimes. For most, introspection is alien, and discussion of the nature of reality is considered a waste of time—whatever that is (2). We are a species with a life-long attention deficit disorder. We sleep 1/3 of our lives, but do not yet know what sleep is. Given this pathology, the estimate that less than 10% of written human history has survived should come as no surprise. The connection between past, present, and future—if considered at all—is viewed with suspicion. Each generation believes that it is new and unique and that the past has little or no relevance. Under these circumstances, we believe that the time is not yet for a unified theory of human historical existence—far from it.

[2] Nonetheless, exploring whether events have generic properties or attributes *is* within our grasp. A start toward understanding an historical event may be made based on the paradigms of computer languages. Examples of an "event" in a computer application, such as a word processor, would be: depressing the CTRL key and the 'u' key together. This would cause future typing to underline. Depressing the CTRL key and the 'i' key together would cause italics. Depressing the CTRL key and the 'b' key together would cause bolding. Depressing the ALT key and the F4 key together would close the active window. The computer application is constantly polling for events so-designated by the designer(s). Thus, when such "actionable" keystroke

combinations occur, the application reacts: the appropriate event handler is invoked, and the appropriate result is delivered—underlining, italicizing, bolding, closing the window, etc. In addition to the event, computer languages provide another useful paradigm: the object and its properties. As an example, an input box (text box) in a desktop application is considered an object that would have properties such as: Name, Visible (Yes or No), Decimal Places, Font, Width, Height, Back Color, and dozens more. High-level computer languages such as Visual Basic, use what is called "dot notation" to describe, define, and manipulate such properties, e.g.

```
textbox1.Font = Times New Roman
textbox1.FontSize = 14
textbox1.Visible = Yes
```

In our opinion, human events generically may be described in terms of properties. It is possible, though unlikely, that human events have such mechanical features as events associated with computer objects. If they do, we are too close to them to recognize them as such. To put it more plainly, we believe that the "who, what, when, where, and how" of traditional historical analysis can be extended, and that by reflecting on some of these extensions we can get closer to understanding the nature of an event, and be better poised for the time when some coherence can be brought to the data gathered. Let us now examine some of these generalized properties that events, both personal and "historical", seem to possess.

For the purposes of this exposition, let us consider three cases ("events") and see whether they can be characterized using the same properties: (1) the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D.; (2) the lifetime of a person ("you"); (3) the genocide of a people. All share the .who .what .when .where and .how properties. However, the presence of the volcano introduces another issue: .agency—was the event a natural one (such as a volcano, earthquake, tsunami) or caused by human agency? In the past this line could be clearly drawn. Today, however, human activities such as explosive drilling for oil and deforestation can create a mixed situation. Another proposed property, .impact, also can be mixed. Was the impact on humans, and/or on nature, on other creatures, or on subclasses of these? Causality (.why) should be and usually is part of standard historical analysis. If the event was by the agency of one or more individuals, a group, class, caste, or nation, what was the motivation?

[3] Events can have precedents (.parents) and consequences (.children). As in the case of astronomical events, we may not be in a position to recognize either quickly, within our lifetimes or even within many generations. This is one of the peculiarities of historical analysis: the author's temporal position with respect to the event is significant. If we consider the situation of genocide, we see that almost all genocides are preceded by various types of oppressions and massacres. However the pattern does not become clear until the event of the genocide itself. That is to say *after* the genocide the precedents can be seen as leading up to it. The consequences or .children of events exhibit the same temporal peculiarities. Observed closeup they seem one thing; much later they may acquire a different gravity.

It should come as no surprise that relying on just the standard properties: .who .what .when .where and .how there has been and is ferocious and often violent "debate" about many historical events. The few "new" properties proposed in the preceding paragraph—though, of course, they are not really new—are still not sufficient. Let us add a few more, probably the most variable, to our expanding and expandable list. Two additional properties concern time: event.frequency and event.predictability. Is the event something that happens repeatedly and does it happen with such regularity that it can be predicted? This was the goal of the 19-20th century historians who longed to be physicists—to uncover the "laws" of human history to the point that they could predict events. Once again we are confronted with our limitations as humans. If there are such laws, it probably would take a long-lived alien to notice them, or humans so perceptive that they would be

mutations. Still, the belief that there *are* such laws is deeply rooted in many belief systems, and is implicit in cyclical theories of history.

A very important, crucial property of an event is its perception. When something "happens" how important is it? Are the marriages, divorces, and affairs of celebrities which are presented in screaming headlines on supermarket tabloids "important?" To whom? How about in 500 years? Again, the temporal factor operates here conversely as well, since an event of "no importance" today may become one of major importance over time.

Let us examine our expandable generic event model thus far:

event.who (principals)
event.what
event.when (duration, periodization)(3)
event.where (location(s))
event.how
event.agency (caused by humans; not caused by humans)
event.impact (on: humans, animals, nature)
event.why (causality)
event.parents (precedents)
event.children (antecedents)
event.frequency
event.predictability
event.perception
event.facts

[4] The last property, facts, requires some reflection. Just as we ask "what is an event?" we should inquire about facts. "Facts are stupid things," said Ronald Reagan, U.S. President, in 1988, misquoting John Adams' observation "Facts are stubborn things." For our purposes, facts consist of primary and secondary written sources, including inscriptional and archaeological evidence. Possibly a fact is a smaller or child version of an event. It may have some of the same properties as an event such as .when .where and other properties. Its .impact and/or .perception may be the principal thing which separates a fact from an event. An increase in a fact's impact and/or its perception may elevate it to event status.

Let us ask the question: if something has some or all of the properties or attributes discussed, is it an "event?" For example, consider our lives and the billions of lives before our own. Our existences have some or all of the properties described. What is it that separates our births, deeds, and deaths from those of the handful of immortals (so-called)? It is the *perception* of the influence of our actions. Propagandists have long understood this, and just as we have spoken of true events, we may speak of manufactured events. Sometimes these are deliberate falsifications, sometimes completely new inventions, and/or the manipulation of the properties of existing events.

*

In this essay we have proposed a template—an extensible event model or event class—for describing and analyzing historical events based on generic attributes or properties, taking constructs from computer languages as a guide. Rather than attempting a traditional definition, we have opted for a description of properties or characteristics, which may be added to and/or qualified. On closer inspection it appears that, in true atomic fashion, events are composed of smaller events just as, ultimately, the solar system breaks down into microscopic versions of itself. While we are unable at present to observe the larger events, observing the

smaller ones is not impossible. At our present level of development, we believe that the methodical collection and categorization of data is the most dependable path to innovative historical analysis.

Footnotes

1. The topic is not unexamined by philosophers, however. See Gilles Deleuze's "What is an Event?" in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley (Minneapolis, 1992); also Roberto Casati and Achille C. Varzi, "Events-An Annotated Bibliography." Terms such as *eventology* (used in mathematics) and *eventography* (used in photography) certainly could be used for the study of and recording of historical events as well. Traditional and modern concepts of what history is and how it could/should be written are described admirably in the numerous short articles on Wikipedia's Historiography, Theories of History, and Social Cycle Theory pages. The following published works provide excellent studies of the trends in ancient, medieval, and modern historiography and are important sources for additional bibliography: Ernst Breisach, *Historiography, Ancient, Medieval & Modern*, Second Edition (Chicago, 1994); Paul K. Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, *Heritage and Challenge. The History and Theory of History* (Wheeling, Illinois, 1989); Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians. A Historiographical Introduction*, Fifth Edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2003); *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present*, edited, selected, and introduced by Fritz Stern (New York, 1973); and Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1999).

2. See John McTaggart's stimulating article, now online, The Unreality of Time, first published in *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy 17* (1908): 456-473.

3. For a fascinating discussion of periodization and culture in general see the writings of the anthropologist A. L. Kroeber, especially *An Anthropologist Looks at History* (Berkeley, 1963). [Note: chapters from this important book are now available on another page of this website: Writings on Historiography.]

© 2008 R. Bedrosian